
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

Landmark/District:	Foggy Bottom Historic District	(x) Agenda
Address:	916 25th Street, NW	
Meeting Date:	October 25, 2012	(x) Alterations
Case Number:	12-609	(x) Addition
Staff Reviewer:	Tim Dennée	(x) Concept

The applicant, Studio:Crowley Hall, agent and architects for property owners Roberto Izurieta and Paul Quirk, request the Board’s conceptual review of a proposal to add a rooftop addition and expand the basement¹ at a two-story, brick rowhouse, constructed in 1885-1886. The drawing also suggests that a rooftop deck forward of the addition might be proposed, but it is not drawn. Similarly, the basement plan indicates that a basement window *might* be proposed on the façade.

The applicants submitted a similar proposal for a rooftop addition that the Board reviewed in February. As then, the present drawings do not depict elevations, but they do include plans and a section/sightline drawing.

The Board denied the previous concept application, holding that the proposal was incompatible with the character of the subject property and of the historic district. The staff took the position that it is unlikely that any such addition would not be visible from the street, and the Board suggested that the applicant explore a traditional rear addition, realizing that that poses a zoning issue. The staff report is attached for reference, as it goes into detail comparing the proposal to prior projects in Foggy Bottom and elsewhere. This report is largely a reiteration of the earlier one.

The submission of sightline studies can suggest an impression that the visibility of a roof addition from the street in front is the only important design and preservation consideration.

¹ When the application was submitted two months ago, an extension of the basement into the rear yard was also proposed. It was eliminated in a more recent revision, but it appears that the basement will still be further dug and renovated for an apartment-like space. This would be interior work and not subject to the Board’s review—unless the applicant intends to pursue creating basement windows, especially on the façade.

The formerly proposed basement addition probably would have been sufficiently compatible, despite not having been fully detailed. Such additions are still rare enough to be unusual, and rare enough that guidance on them has not been developed. To the extent that they come above grade, they may serve as the base for a rear deck, as this one would have. The most traditional way to add to a house is, of course, a mostly above-grade rear addition, which is what the Board had suggested in its February review. But a lower basement addition, although unusual, could be a useful way to expand in this constrained context, without a zoning variance. And it would have less of a visual effect on the surrounding houses, even from a “light and air” perspective, and would minimize demolition of the rear wall. But it presents some challenges for getting its own light and air into the mostly below-ground space.

This is simply not the case. The published guidance to applicants on the subject states that,

Adding vertically to a historic building is generally discouraged as such additions typically alter significant features, such as its roof line, height, relationship with surrounding buildings, and overall form and mass[ing].

The preservation law does not limit the Board's review to what is visible from the street, nor does it dismiss the importance of the rear, top, or body of a building. Priority is normally given to the façade, as the most effort was put into its design, and rear yards were typically utilitarian, and the location for additions and outbuildings. But that is not to say that the only thing that is important is the view of a passerby on the street. All aspects of historic buildings may be important, including their physical fabric, and views from alleys or rear yards are also important to the character of a historic district.

Roof additions have generally been strongly discouraged on rows of modest, two-story houses (several examples of such cases were cited in the previous staff report). This is because it creates an odd and incompatible mass that disturbs the building's roofline. On a tall building with a large footprint, a modest rooftop addition may disappear. On a smaller building, an addition has a disproportionate impact as it is proportionally larger and more prominent. When roof additions are allowed on larger houses, they are generally pushed forward from the rear wall—as they are generally pushed rearward from the front—to diminish their prominence and to retain the original roofline, especially along a row.² In the present instance, in the interest of setting back the addition sufficiently, it actually cantilevers beyond the present rear wall, making it *more* prominent and more unusually shaped when seen from the back, from the alley and from other properties.

The height and massing of a historic building are fundamental features, and any addition must be carefully considered for its probable effects on these characteristics. Especially for residential properties, upward additions were historically much less common rather than horizontal ones, and many of the upward additions were harmful to the character of the original buildings.

Additions on top of a building can *sometimes* [emphasis added] be achieved when they are not visible from street views, do not result in the removal or alteration of important character-defining features of the building or streetscape, and are compatible with their context.... Under most circumstances, roof additions that are visible from a public street are not appropriate, as they would alter an historic building's height, mass, design composition, cornice line, roof, and its relationship to surrounding buildings and streetscape—all of which are important character-defining features that are protected for historic property.

In other words, in most cases, roof additions are not appropriate. It is the exception when they can be done successfully.

² When the Board reviewed in 2010 a roof addition for 2007 Columbia Road, a large home, the rear was the only ground-level vantage point from which to see the new structure. The Board and staff felt that this vantage point was nonetheless important, and it was crucial to maintain a compatible massing and height/proportion when considering any addition.

As discussed at the previous hearing, experience shows that a sightline from directly across the street that just touches, or just misses, a proposed rooftop addition is an almost-certain indication that the addition would be at least somewhat visible. As the Board has discussed many times, such structures are usually more visible with *oblique* views. Further, a section/sightline drawing relies on first, the drawings being precisely accurate; second, the ultimate construction being the the thinnest possible framing and roofing, without any sort of parapet on the side walls typically required for fire separation; and third, the construction being completed exactly as drawn, or lower. Error tends to creep into the drawings as well as into the construction, as when the crew does not make reference to some vantage point off site. We cannot be certain that the roof, which now slopes rearward, will be reconstructed level at the present height of the second-floor ceiling framing. There are practical reasons why it might be higher and even more sloped.

Experience has shown that, where there is absolutely no room for error, such projects do not succeed in meeting the standard of “invisibility.” This is true for the most well-intended projects. The applicant’s project architects have done roof additions elsewhere and not always quite succeeded in this regard. At 1915 Newton Street, for instance, where the addition was to be obscured behind a partial mansard, a second roof ridge is visible.

The photograph below is probably sufficient to suggest how easy it would be to see objects over the roofs of these fairly shallow houses.



The preservation law explicitly balances the preservation interest with the interest in adaptability. With the rehabilitation—and the potential expansion—of the basement, this modest house can accommodate three bedrooms and two bathrooms, without a roof addition. For the sake of

adding a bed and bath to the roof, there would be a substantial adverse effect on the exterior of the house and the row.

By regulation, the Board is not obligated to review twice within a year's time projects at a single property that are substantially the same. This application was accepted because it originally contained a basement addition, which itself constituted a substantial change. To the extent that the roof addition is different from that proposed in February, it is debatable whether it is better in terms of compatibility, although it would be less prominent as seen from the front.

The Board must be reasonably consistent in seeing that the kinds of additions it approves should to be generalizable to similar cases. Modest rowhouses are the principal type of contributing building in the small Foggy Bottom Historic District. Protection of their history and character as housing for the diverse residents of the once largely industrial neighborhood was the reason why the neighborhood was designated. They should be carefully preserved.

Recommendation

The staff recommends that the Board not support the concept of a roof addition, as it would be incompatible with the character of the historic district.



**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

Landmark/District: **Foggy Bottom Historic District** (x) Agenda
Address: **916 25th Street, NW** () Consent

Meeting Date: **February 23, 2012** (x) Addition
Case Number: **12-203**

Staff Reviewer: **Tim Dennée**

The applicants, expediter Cathie Harrison and architects Studio Crowley Hall, agents for owners Roberto Izurieta and Paul Quirk, request the Board's review of a concept to construct a roof addition atop a two-story, brick rowhouse erected in 1885. This was part of a speculative development by builders Danenhower & Son that included the contemporaneous alley dwellings on Hughes Mews, and it reflects the typically modest rental housing that was available in the once blue-collar, industrial neighborhood of Foggy Bottom. Although this row consists of only four houses, it continues two similar rows that stand to the south and faces homes of a similar height across the street.

The drawings indicate that this would be a frame addition set about ten feet rearward of the plane of the façade. The sightline study and the photo mock-ups indicate that the addition would be readily visible from 25th Street, a fact that is apparent merely from observing this row (one can see over the fairly shallow houses at an elevation that is low enough that no roof addition could be invisible from street level).

The drawings indicate the maximum height as nine feet, atop a roof structure that would have to be removed and reframed, of course, to support it. Some of the addition would be concealed behind a front parapet. This height is, of course, a best-case scenario, assuming the most compact possible floor and roof assemblies, no rooftop mechanical, and a complete lack of side parapets (plus construction perfectly complying with the drawings, assuming no errors or measurement nor unforeseen circumstances).

The drawings are no more than a massing study, which is probably a wise recognition that a rooftop addition atop a two-story rowhouse is a yes/no proposition, details aside.

As stated in the HPRB-adopted guidance to applicants, the Board "generally requires that new roof decks not be visible from surrounding streets or public sidewalks so as not to alter the character or appearance of the building or streetscape."

Adding vertically to a historic building is generally discouraged as such additions typically alter significant features, such as its roof line, height, relationship with surrounding buildings, and overall form and mass[ing]. Additions on top of a building can sometimes be achieved when they are not visible from street views,

do not result in the removal or alteration of important character-defining features of the building or streetscape, and are compatible with their context.... Under most circumstances, roof additions that are visible from a public street are not appropriate, as they would alter an historic building's height, mass, design composition, cornice line, roof, and its relationship to surrounding buildings and streetscape—all of which are important character-defining features that are protected for historic property.

Although the Board has been less discouraging of roof additions on some types of large buildings that were historically more commonly altered with a penthouse, it has strongly discouraged additions atop more modest buildings where the alteration would be proportionally greater, more prominently visible, and less typical of the building type.

While the most problematic type of roof addition proposal has been one that would destroy a prominently visible pitched roof that is a character-defining feature of a building, the second most problematic class includes both low, freestanding buildings—which would not admit the concealment of a roof addition from any angle—and rowhouses, where an inappropriate alteration could affect not just the subject property but the appearance and historic integrity of the entire row. Of this latter type, the Board has recommend that partial additional stories *not* be built at 1436 T Street NW, 1745 Swann Street NW, 516 Groff Court NE, 1242 U Street SE, 816-818 Rhode Island Avenue NW, 438 Ridge Street NW and 2407-2409 I Street NW, to name only a few, plus numerous examples of other low buildings that are not parts of a row. The architects in the present case have worked on a few rowhouse projects in the Mount Pleasant Historic District, successfully observing the standard that roof additions not be visible from the street.

The present application consists mostly of photographs of the historic district, either depicting the proposal's immediate context or properties that have structures on their roof—the implication being either that such structures provide the neighborhood's predominant character/context *or* that other, similar things have been approved previously and thus, so should the present application.

The Foggy Bottom Historic District was designated in 1986, principally to protect the handful of modest rows that comprise the neighborhood. Even then, defending against the phenomenon of “pop-ups” was one of the reasons designation proponents submitted a historic district nomination. Several of the present rooftop structures pictured in the application actually pre-date the historic designation. These include the gable roof on the non-contributing building at 935 25th Street, a partial fourth story on a non-contributing house at 2531 I Street, partial third stories at 2514 and 2516 I Street, and two stair pop-ups at 2407 and 2409 I Street.³

³ The first two being non-contributing, they would today receive a lesser standard of review than for historic buildings. The gable on 935 25th is debatable, because it stands out from the rest of the row, but it would probably have to be approved today, even if discouraged. On the other hand, the addition at 2531 I Street is quite compatible with the underlying modernist house. The rowhouse at 2516 I Street has had a “makeover” which incorporated the rooftop addition into a large rear addition and re-siding. It and 2514 I Street were cited in 2002 as evidence as to why a permit should *not* be issued for a similar proposal for 2520 I Street. And as unsightly as the two rooftop structures at 2407-2409 I Street may be, their replacement with a larger, partial third story was also rejected, as incompatible with the character of the row.

Of the additions approved (more or less) by the Historic Preservation Review Board, 2512 I Street is *not* a rooftop addition, but rather a three-story addition behind the original house, which screens the higher rear addition from across the street.⁴

So, the only addition comparable to the proposed and constructed since 1986 stands at nearby 912 25th Street. About this structure, it can only be said that it was a dreadful mistake. Built two decades ago and reviewed at a time when such proposals were less numerous, former staff may have been convinced that it would not be visible, or minimally so, although it seems difficult to understand that in retrospect.⁵ Even if not obvious then, it certainly is now. Copying such a mistake, rather than learning from it and resolving not to repeat it, would seem foolish consistency indeed.

The instances cited above demonstrate that the exceptions prove the rule. It is the repetition of this tiny historic district's predominant building type, the rowhouse, that defines the neighborhood's character, and not the rooftop jumble on a handful of the units. It is imperative that the Board defend the former against the latter. To support third stories on the historic rowhouses would cross a pretty important line, taking the difficult issue of rooftop additions farther than it has gone. Expected to be reasonably consistent and not capricious, the Board could be opening up thousands more of the District of Columbia's historic buildings to similar, prominent alterations of height and massing, leaving the notion of some degree of setback as the only remaining rule.

The staff recommends that the Board not support the concept, as it is incompatible with the character of the subject property and the historic district and, therefore, inconsistent with the purposes of the preservation law.

⁴ The compatibility of higher rear additions, for rows or abutting or isolated houses, are always worth questioning, but the mere construction of a building at three stories in this historic district is not inherently incompatible because there is some variety of heights. A new three-story house on Hughes Mews was supported by the Board several years ago. Rooftop additions are among the trickiest projects, because in the field they will frequently, even typically deviate from the drawings, almost always on the higher side, because of unanticipated issues or carelessness—which is all the more reason they should be discouraged and handled with the utmost care.

⁵ Once built, the law could not require that subsequent owners remove it. Consequently, a few years ago, the Board approved a reconstruction of the structure necessitated by poor initial construction, and managed to lower its profile somewhat.